



Making Waves: Recent Developments of the South China Sea Disputes

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Abstract

The rocks of the South China Sea (SCS) are where state sovereignty and geopolitics converge. As observed by many, sovereignty disputes in the SCS entail more than simply who owns what particular geologic and geographic features. They involve shifting rights, shipping lanes, oil and natural gas reserves, the maritime environment, and security. These contested maritime zones have led to significant tensions in the region and raise great concerns for nations using the shipping lanes for international trade. These quarrels are also linked to rising nationalism in every claimant nation. At dispute are both ownership of land features and what rules to apply in resolving the disputes, since rules determine results. Continued tensions have restrained policies among the nations involved, making interactions difficult at times. To further complicate matters, nations have started to reclaim land to expand their control at the expense of others. To more vividly demonstrate how dynamic the “status quo” in the SCS is, this paper surveys the latest developments in the region; analyzes different attitudes and responses of various capitals to actions in the SCS in recent years. Competing interests are investigated to gauge each claimant’s strategies. The complexity of the overlapping claims involved calls for dialogue toward a peaceful diplomatic solution.

Outline

China’s South China Sea Policies and Actions

- At the heart of Beijing’s South China Sea claims is the eleven-dashed line drawn by the pre-Communist government in 1947
- Three faces of Chinese power
 - money, minds, and might
- Perceived injustices related to the international settlement
- San Francisco Peace Treaty

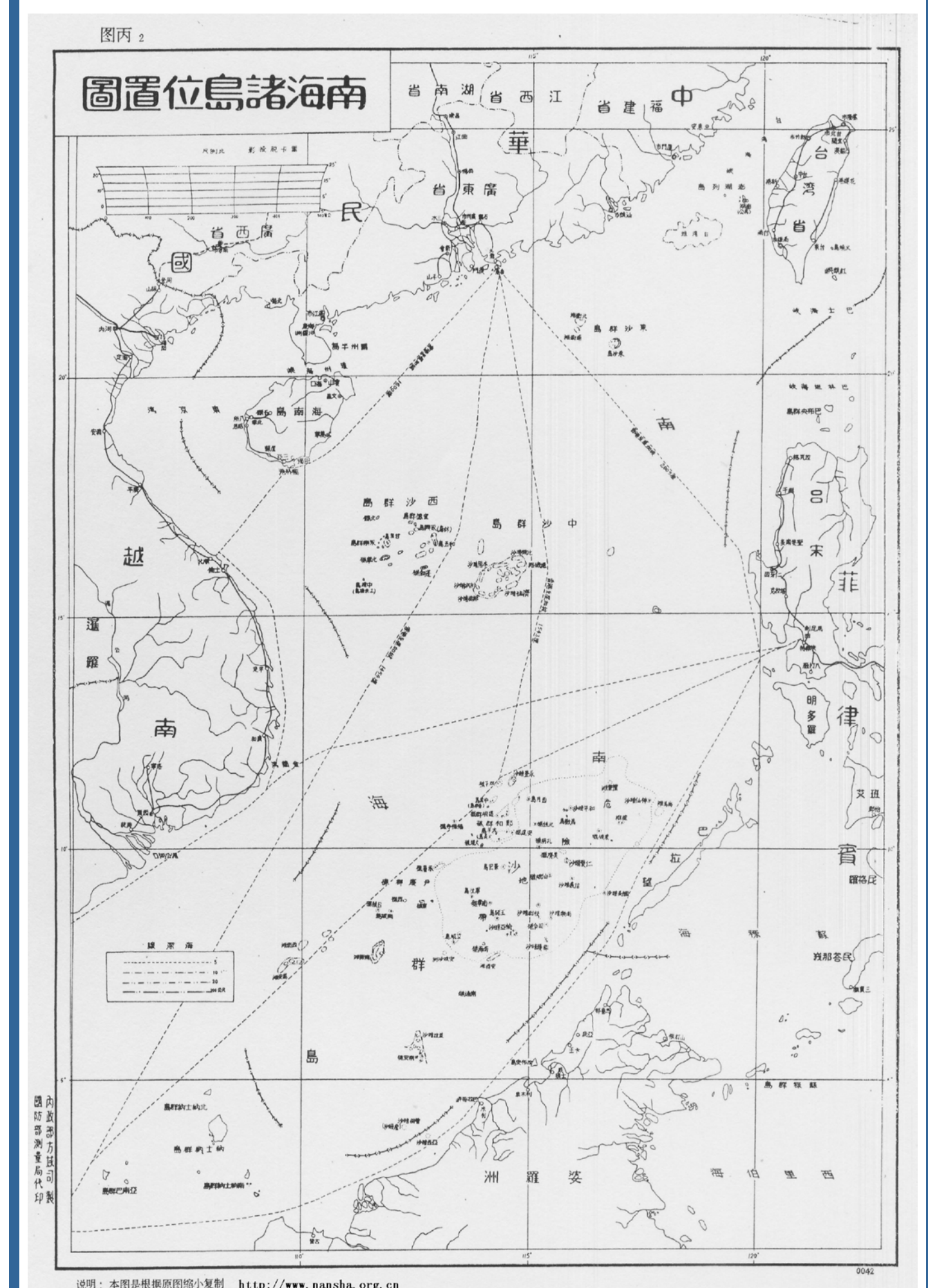
Stakeholders’ Divergent Responses to China

- **Malaysia:** Passive and Cooperative, to an Extent
- **Philippines:** Weak, but Vocal and Aggressive
- **Indonesia:** Confused But Resolute
- **Brunei:** Quiet and Peaceful
- **Vietnam:** Adamant and Armed

Regional Organizations and Extra-Regional Powers

- **ASEAN:** In Disarray
- **Japan and Australia:** Firm with the United States
- **United States:** Beijing’s “Multiple Personalities”

The 1947 Map: 11-dashed Line



American FONOPS



US Ships in the South China Sea patrolling the waters

Conclusion

This research updates the competitive engagements between the US and China, as well as between Beijing and its rivals, over the South China Sea (SCS). The overlapping claims to sovereignty contribute to tensions involving a variety of stakeholders, with global political, military, and economic importance. As China's economic rise facilitates growing military capabilities, its neighbors are also experiencing their own rise in nationalism and military capability. Considering the complexity of the overlapping claims involved, increased use of the contested waters by China and its neighbors augment the risk that miscalculations by sea captains or political leaders could trigger an armed conflict in the region. The analysis of various attitudes in the SCS issues indicates that the ASEAN members, minus Vietnam and the Philippines, see no reason to jump on the anti-China wagon.